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1963/05/30

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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~~SECRET~~ Number 1 of 10 copies, Series A

TO : M - Governor Harriman
THROUGH : S/S
FROM : FE - Roger Hilsman
SUBJECT : Soviet Influence in Laos and US Public Posture
Related Thereto
REFERENCE : Your Oral Request of May 14

In the May 14 Assistant Secretaries meeting you requested our opinion as to what the US public posture toward Soviet action or inaction in Laos should be, mentioning also the relevant questions of how much influence the USSR has in Peiping and Hanoi, and whether the USSR now would dare to follow a line regarding Laos which was substantially different from that of the Chinese Communists.

Discussion:

Three possible interpretations of the present apparent Soviet attitude are:

- 1) They have decided against cooperation to make Geneva work and have aligned themselves with the Chicoms and North Vietnamese;
- 2) They have decided to play along with the Chicoms and Viet Minh for the present because they wish to conciliate the Chicoms and maintain their position in Hanoi; and
- 3) They are unable to exert meaningful influence over their partners short of sanctions they do not wish to employ, at least at this time.

INR has done a memorandum (Tab A) expressing the view that the USSR still has important means of exerting influence over Peiping and Hanoi in regard to Laos, and outlining some of them (the New York Times editorial of May 28 also speaks to the same point). The INR

memo,

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memo, however, expresses the opinion that Moscow would employ its major means of influence only if the situation were one which seriously threatened US intervention; indeed, it seems to us they would not be effective in any other situation. It is questionable whether the Soviets realize how far we have been pushed towards US military action in the Laos-Viet-Nam area; if they did, their willingness to consider recourse to the more major means of influence over Hanoi and Peiping might rise. It may be time for us to give them clearer signs of the true situation. Meanwhile, there may well be lesser things the USSR could do to affect the situation in favor of Souvanna if it wished -- retaining Soviet aircraft maintenance personnel in Vientiane, for instance. We think it does not, however, want to run the risks that the Chinese Communists could make telling points against it with Hanoi and in the context of the forthcoming Soviet confrontation with the Chinese Communists in Moscow.

Accordingly, it appears to us that the Soviets are partly unwilling to play a really helpful role in Laos and partly unable to convert their potential influence into effective pressure on Peiping and Hanoi (i.e., they could not greatly influence Peiping and Hanoi without using sanctions they do not wish to employ).

We believe there is something to be gained by continuing to emphasize before world opinion the special Soviet responsibility in regard to Laos. The counter-pressures of world opinion and the USSR's wider interests may in consequence cause the Soviets to do something more on behalf of stability in Laos than they otherwise would. In any case, the world support we get for whatever measures we may have to employ in Laos should be greater if world opinion has already been made aware of the contrast between Soviet obligations and Soviet performance.

Conclusion

If we admit publicly that the USSR cannot fulfill its part of the Geneva Agreements we would thereby let it off the hook, freeing the Soviets of any obligation to be helpful. Therefore, we feel publicly and privately we should keep up a steady drum beat on them to live up to their special commitment. We should also feel free to cite specifics: With regard to the Viet Minh, we should continue to cite their presence in Laos and indicate we consider the Soviets obligated to have them withdrawn. We may have to admit that the Soviets appear to have less influence than heretofore over Peiping and Hanoi consequent to the Sino-Soviet dispute, that this dispute may also have reduced their willingness to utilize their influence for the

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purpose of supporting the Geneva Agreements. We should take the attitude that they still have enough means of persuasion which they should use with Peiping, Hanoi and Warsaw. Soviet failure to use their influence would risk an escalation in Laos dangerous to world peace and would undermine efforts toward detente elsewhere, for the other countries concerned could not be expected to put any faith in further negotiations after the Communist side had destroyed those agreements so recently and so painfully negotiated at Geneva.

(At his press conference yesterday, the Secretary, in response to questions on Laos, expressed hope that "the full weight and resources of the Soviet Union are being thrown in behind faithful adherence to the Geneva Accords." The Secretary observed that "if the two Co-Chairmen who have also special responsibilities, the ICC, the coalition government and the signatories all put their full weight behind the Geneva Accords, there is no reason why the independence and neutrality of Laos cannot be effected and properly guaranteed. So we are watching this very closely and expect and hope that the Soviet Union will do everything that it can to assure those Accords.")

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Concurrence:

FE/P: Mr. ^{WJ}Manell

SEA; HLT/Koren: ^{WJ}
FE: EER/ice: pea
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MAY 16 1963

TO : The Secretary
THROUGH: S/S
FROM : INR - Thomas L. Hughes

SUBJECT: Moscow's Influence Over Peiping and Hanoi

At Mr. Hillman's request, we have examined the state of Moscow's potential influence over Peiping and Hanoi in the light of continued Communist obstructionism in Laos and against the background of the Sino-Soviet dispute.

Russia's Military Position. The most telling argument Moscow might raise if it wished to caution Peiping against provoking an escalation of the conflict in Laos stems from Peiping's ultimate reliance on the Sino-Soviet alliance to deter attacks from without and to defend Communist China should such an attack come about. We doubt that Peiping has much confidence in Moscow's support in view of the Sino-Soviet dispute. At the same time, we do not believe an explicit confrontation on Moscow's willingness to defend Peiping has as yet occurred. Therefore a Soviet warning -- that Chinese Communist political encouragement and material support of Pathet Lao military moves under conditions that threatened escalation or spreading of the conflict would result in a Soviet reneging of its commitment to defend China -- would probably influence Peiping against overt involvement in Laos. Moscow might also dissuade Peiping from encouraging and supporting the Pathet Lao, perhaps even inducing Peiping to add its own influence as a restraining element vis-a-vis the Pathet Lao.

Moscow can credibly remind Peiping that its military involvement in a Laotian conflict would probably trigger a quick NATO response. Chiang Kai-shek might attempt to strike the mainland with US support, and India, backed by US-Commonwealth help, would feel encouraged to recoup its loss of prestige by action in Tibet. We believe that Peiping's general policy of caution and its specific avoidance of military confrontation with Western power would make the regime receptive to such advice, although it might differ with Soviet estimates on the risk of escalation and continue clandestine support for the Pathet Lao, calculating that action can be halted when the risk increases.

The Effect on Hanoi. There is inadequate evidence for assessing Hanoi's present relationship with Moscow as opposed to Peiping. Even assuming that Hanoi has already adopted a pro-Chinese orientation thereby introducing a hard line into Communist activity in Laos, Hanoi would not resist Chinese Communist advice to avoid risks of escalation. North Vietnam is too dependant on at least one of the two major Communist powers providing it with military and economic assistance to isolate itself in this manner.

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